SLAVERY, BONDAGE AND DEPENDENCY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A REVIEW*

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Thanks to the efforts of Anthony Reid and the colleagues assembled at his initiative at Australian National University in 1980, we now have a quite remarkable collection of evidence and argument on the history of slavery and other forms of bondage in Southeast Asia. The collection is ambitious in its scope, moving as it does from Burma to Batavia, from Malaya to Luzon, from thirteenth century Angkor to nineteenth century Sulawesi, from straightforward chattel slavery to clientelism, and from legal texts to the analysis of trade routes and social organization. The photos and maps are carefully chosen to illustrate and supplement the text. And, rarer still, there is enough conceptual cohesion in the volume as a whole to leave the reader with the conviction that a good many thorny intellectual issues have been sharply addressed, if not definitively settled. The general quality of the contributions is high. In particular, however, I found the introduction by Anthony Reid, the analysis of *oripun* and *alipun* in sixteenth century Philippines by William Scott, the examination of the slave trade in South Sulawesi by Heather Sutherland, and the account of the impact of slave raiding on Malaya's aboriginal population by K. Endicott to be especially perceptive and thoughtful.

Despite the great disparities in the forms of bondage and slavery which have characterized Southeast Asia over such a vast sweep of history and social structure, a few conclusions and comparisons are possible. Here I do no more than compile a portion of the many insights the contributors and editor have suggested.

Most of the authors are surely correct when they place the phenomenon of slavery securely in the context of Southeast Asia's demography: the need for labor control where there was, as yet, a relative abundance of land to which subsistence producers could often flee. Here the parallels with late fourteenth and fifteenth century Western Europe, after the plague had brought about a severe labor shortage, are striking, although rarely exploited by the contributors. The importance of control over manpower, rather than land, is reflected in a system of personal-lordship which does not coincide with territorial units of villages or towns. Thus the families in a Thai or Burman village may "belong" to any one of several officials or chiefs. The practice of tattooing or branding subjects with a mark to indicate to whom they belonged and the practice of encouraging "bounty-hunters" to round up runaways indicate both the personal nature of subordination and the frequency of that classic Southeast Asian response to oppression: flight.

The authors are alert as well to the remarkable variety of bondage throughout the region. There was, it seems evident, no sharply demarcated boundary between free and unfree, but rather a vast continuum from nearly pure chattel slavery

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* Anthony Reid, ed., *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*, with the assistance of Jennifer Brewster (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

at one extreme all the way to debt-bondage, looking for all the world like sharecropping, at the other extreme. One encounters slaves who work for their master all year every year, others who work two months of the year, others who work for their master one day in four, and still others who accompany their master only on trading expeditions. Although Reid insists correctly on reserving the term slave for those who can be freely bought and sold as commodities, we are nonetheless driven to a realization that it might perhaps be more accurate to speak of 100 percent slaves, 80 percent slaves, 20 percent slaves, and so on.

Given the possibility of flight, the scarcity of manpower, and the limited means of coercion available to slaveowners and states, bondage in Southeast Asia, for all its episodic horrors, is simply not on the order of what was found in the West Indies, in the antebellum South of the United States, or on the Roman latifundium. With few notable exceptions, plantation slavery with its profligate waste of human lives is not found in Southeast Asia. This is why the function of the slave is a better indication of his or her condition than is legal status per se. This is why a whole class of valuable slaves is often markedly better off than many ordinary subjects. This is also why slave revolts are comparatively rare: aside from a few shipboard revolts during transportation and the Javanese slave rebellion in Patani in 1616.

Reid and a few of his collaborators are especially good at integrating slavery into existing social patterns and state formation. Thus slaves typically were *taken from* weak, highland, divided, and peripheral societies and were *delivered to* strong, lowland, centralized kingdoms, as well as to the major urban centers of commerce such as Batavia. Slave trading and raiding was well integrated into the traditional animosities between highland and lowland populations, not to mention the animosities between highland chiefs. For some lowland Malays, for example, the hill peoples become one of many "forest products" to be taken and traded.

Another fascinating aspect of bondage was the tension between the traditional state as master and the "private" ownership of slaves. In Burma and Thailand the state was always sensitive to a growth of privately owned bondsmen who were not taxable or "corvée-able" by the crown, which threatened to undermine the balance of power between the state and its office-holding aristocracy.

A fair part of the research on which these accounts are based derives from legal documents and codes governing slavery. Here there is occasionally a tendency to take such legal descriptions as a reflection of the facts rather than as an indication of the problems which required regulation, adjudication, and punishment. Thus, the laws indicating the punishments allowed for insults, drunkenness, absconding, or physical attacks by slaves not only tell us what the law was, but also imply that insults, absconding, and physical attacks were frequent enough to merit serious attention. A more sensitive "social" reading of the legal texts, on the order of what has been done for the legal codes of the antebellum United States south, could tell us far more about the actual pattern of slavery.

Another shortcoming of the volume is its rather uncritical, surface reading of some of the "causes" of slavery: namely the sentencing of criminals to bondage and the servitude of debtors. Only Heather Sutherland, for example, notes that "rulers in Nusa Tenggara discovered many wrong-doers about the time the trading *perahus* were due" (p. 271). How much more of "judicial" slavery in Southeast Asia involved the manipulation of customary law in order

to produce a welcome "cash crop" of human commodities? We are also certainly well aware of the creative use of credit and fictitious accounts to produce permanent bondage later in agrarian Southeast Asian history. There seems little reason to doubt that debt could be as easily trumped up as judicial proceedings when the profits were high and the coercion available.

Finally, one would have welcomed much more in the way of an analysis of the consequences of slave raiding on the societies which were raided. Bigalke's contribution on Toraja and, especially, Endicott's fine analysis of the long-run social consequences of raiding on upland peoples in Malaya are exemplary in this regard. One suspects that much of the current attitude of peripheral and highland groups toward the states into which they have been precipitously absorbed bears indelible marks from these raids. Studies of myths, legends, and folktales in this connection would yield fascinating and valuable evidence.

Such reservations are decidedly minor. We have here a splendid collection that takes us light years beyond Bruno Lasker's *Human Bondage in Southeast Asia*. It is hard to see how much more could have been achieved, given the available evidence, than Anthony Reid and his colleagues have accomplished in this seminal work.